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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 003676

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: MUSLIM INSURGENT CHAIRMAN, MALAYSIAN FACILITATOR
WELCOME USG SUPPORT TO PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

REF: A. MANILA 3509 (GOVERNMENT AND MILF BREAK IMPASSE

ON TERRITORY)

[1](#)B. KUALA LUMPUR 1506 (OTHMAN USES IMT THREAT TO
PUSH MANILA)

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Classified By: Classified by DCM Paul W. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: In the first ever official USG meeting with the leader of the Muslim insurgent organization engaged in peace talks with the government, Chairman Murad asked DCM if the U.S. would consider a more formal role in supporting the implementation of an eventual peace agreement with the government. The Malaysian facilitator of the talks arranged and participated in the meeting, which occurred on the eve of resumed negotiations in Kuala Lumpur; regular Embassy meetings over the past year with senior insurgent leaders laid the foundation; senior Philippine government officials, briefed in advance, were supportive. Chairman Murad was friendly, confident and well-versed, opening with appreciation for U.S. support for socio-economic development of Mindanao, and spoke excellent English. The meeting took place without media deep inside the insurgent camp near Cotabato city in Mindanao; the mile-long dirt road was lined with an honor guard of insurgent combatants with weapons; 10 Central Committee members accompanied the Chairman. The insurgents subsequently posted a positive, factual story of the meeting on their website. We will continue to expand our consultations with the government, Malaysian facilitators in partnership with Embassy Kuala Lumpur, the various factions of Muslim insurgents and political leadership, Christian and indigenous groups, as well as the business and non-governmental sector in Mindanao. Our direct engagement is clearly welcomed by all parties and can help pull the complex peace process toward concrete progress, possibly including step-by-step eradication of terrorism from Mindanao. End Summary

MILF Chairman Muad

[1](#)2. (C) After a two hour discussion en route (see below), DCM and Malaysian facilitator Datuk Othman Abdul Razak were greeted on November 9 with banners and an honor guard of Muslim insurgents deep inside Camp Darapangan, near Cotabato City, Mindanao. Chairman of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) Murad Ebrahim received DCM and the Malaysian facilitator, flanked by 10 Central Committee members, noting it was his first official USG call on him. Murad was relaxed, friendly and confident, speaking excellent English.

He opened by thanking the U.S. for its contributions to the socio-economic development of Mindanao. Murad underscored the importance of U.S. political support to the peace negotiations. DCM noted that Ambassador and senior Embassy officials encourage progress publicly and privately with key Philippine government officials, while carefully avoiding encroaching on the roles of Malaysia and the negotiating parties. Murad suggested the U.S. consider, along with other key countries, signing a protocol to support the implementation of an eventual peace agreement. Malaysian facilitator Othman endorsed Murad's suggestion. Turning to peace panel member advisor Michael Mastura for details, Murad said the MILF was skeptical that the government would succeed in passing needed legislation through the Philippine congress without greater international support. He indicated that the territorial aspects of the negotiation were complete, but that governance, including security, required more work.

13. (C) Murad emphasized the need for good governance of Mindanao, inclusive of all factions of Muslims as well as Christians and indigenous peoples. The MILF is reaching out to the fractious leaders of the original Muslim insurgent movement, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), to see how its peace agreement, signed in 1996, could be merged with the MILF negotiations, as well as to local Muslim political leaders, Murad said. Malaysian negotiator Othman noted the importance to Indonesia, which facilitated the MNLF peace negotiations, of paying respect to the 1996 agreement (which the MILF has traditionally rejected); Murad agreed. DCM noted that Ambassador has sought opportunities to bring together the various representatives of Muslim, Christian and other communities in Mindanao, such as at an Iftar dinner at her residence or on the reception of the USS Peleliu. All agreed that greater unity was needed for the success of Mindanao.

14. (C) After moving to coffee and snacks, Malaysian facilitator Othman raised the possibility of Ambassador

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visiting Chairman Murad. Murad said a visit by the Ambassador would convey dramatically U.S. support to the peace process; DCM said the Ambassador would welcome such a meeting, with advance arrangements agreed. Othman also prompted a more specific discussion of U.S. concerns over terrorists operating in MILF areas. DCM conveyed the need for continued, step-by-step removal of those who would thwart the peace process from MILF territories, as he has discussed in meetings with Central Committee members over the past year, as the process moves toward signing an agreement.

Malaysian Facilitator Othman

15. (C) During the two hour flight en route, DCM, DATT and Malaysian facilitator Othman engaged in a wide-ranging, collaborative discussion of the peace process, during which Othman conveyed the clear impression that Malaysia welcomes greater official USG support to the peace negotiations. Discussing the likely need for local plebiscites once the new Muslim political entity was agreed, Othman hoped the U.S. would contribute to an international observation effort that could minimize irregularities and boost confidence in the outcome. He asked that the U.S. help convince Philippine government leaders that ASEAN, and Malaysia in particular, will never let the MILF or other Muslim insurgents declare independence from the Philippines. Finally, Othman said he would welcome a direct conversation with the Philippine government's national security cabinet cluster, hinting that we could help arrange that.

16. (S) Speaking personally, Othman conveyed his deep skepticism of the Philippine Armed Forces, speculating that elements may be in league with Abu Sayyaf terrorists and some local Muslim leaders in Mindanao to blame terrorist attacks on the MILF and therefore weaken the Muslim insurgent

organization. DCM explained in detail our assessment that the Philippine Armed Forces has placed progressive, peace-minded generals in key positions in Mindanao, and that we had absolutely no evidence of collusion with the Abu Sayyaf and much evidence to the contrary. Philippine Armed Forces operations, even when provoked, have been measured, focused on building peace and not on falsely pinning blame.

¶7. (C) DCM conveyed our assessment that Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah terrorists, in collusion with elements of the MILF, coordinate on training and conducting bombings to undermine the peace process, foment instability and maintain their sanctuaries in Mindanao. Othman countered that the Abu Sayyaf terrorists conduct bombings, not MILF elements. He said that the MILF had ejected some 100 members of the Jemaah Islamiyah some years ago, and that now only a few remain who have married locally and ceased terrorist activities. Othman maintained that once the MILF has responsibility for governance and internal security as the result of a peace agreement, it will be able to remove the Abu Sayyaf terrorists as well. DCM observed that the peace agreement will not succeed unless the MILF continues to take step by step actions to remove those responsible for bombings in Mindanao, either on its own or in coordination with the Philippine government.

¶8. (C) Othman described his efforts to encourage the MILF to open itself to a broader range of Mindanao business and NGO leaders who could help build its governing capacity, while also preparing itself for transformation into a political party. He criticized the Bangsamoro Development Agency, designed to be the development arm of a new Muslim political entity, for underperforming due to over-reliance on personnel tied to Chairman Murad and lack of consensus within the Central Committee on its role. DCM described USG engagement with Mindanao's domestic and international business community, as well as U.S. assistance strategy. Murad welcomed our emphasis on business growth, while noting the need for Christian and international businesses to adopt affirmative action programs to transition to local, Muslim management, thereby building long-term local community support.

¶10. (C) Comment: Regular meetings over the past year with members of the Central Committee of the MILF, as well Mindanao academics and local leaders, laid the foundation for this friendly and substantive first session with Chairman Murad. Progress in the peace talks and the support of the Malaysian facilitator probably gave Murad needed political cover with the MILF's more radical elements. Quietly building these relationships appears to have convinced the Malaysians and the MILF that we are trusted partners who

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genuinely support the peace process.

¶11. (C) Comment Con't: The U.S. is uniquely positioned as the only country with close relationships among the Philippine government, Malaysian facilitators (through Embassy Kuala Lumpur), all Muslim factions, as well as Christian, indigenous, business and NGO sectors in Mindanao. We will continue to engage substantively all of the players in this multi-dimensional chess game as we press for significant progress in the peace process during 2008, before campaigning begins for the 2010 Philippines presidential elections.

KENNEY